

Borrowing a Bear

By C. B. LEWIS

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Joe Whitman, cowboy, rode up to the Circle ranch house one day to see old Colonel Meecham about some lost cattle, and ten minutes later he had lost his heart to Miss Rose, the colonel's daughter, who was then a girl of nineteen and her father's housekeeper.

Circle ranch had been a great ranch in its day, but the colonel had met with all sorts of bad luck and couldn't pay his debts. He had a few cattle and one cowboy left, while a colored woman assisted Rose about the housework.

Rose Meecham had not been educated in the east. She had been born in the ranch house and sent to a school not a hundred miles away, and her environments had been of the plainest. As the adoring father said of her more than once after his wife died:

"Rose is good looking and honest hearted and will make some man a good wife. There's nothing of the coquette or flirt about her. She doesn't know what a flirtation means. She's just a plain girl, with her heart set on doing all she can for her old daddy."

That was the colonel's way of putting it, and it shows how little the average father knows of the average daughter. Miss Rose was good looking and honest hearted, but she would flirt with a cross-eyed cowboy. Any other girl in her situation would have done the same thing. There wasn't another girl for fifteen miles around, while there were about fifty cowboys within that distance, and besides there was the fort only five miles away and soldiers passing on the road every day.

Joe Whitman may have been above the average cowboy in looks and education. Miss Rose had decided within five minutes that she liked him. Within another five she was smiling so sweetly and talking so nicely that she had Joe stammering out his words.

That was the beginning of things. He had driven home a bunch of the colonel's cattle that he had cut out of the herd, and though he wanted to linger at the ranch and talk about the price of beef on the hoof, the drop in hides and the dry summer, he wasn't equal to the occasion and was almost bucked off his pony in taking his leave.

Joe rallied when he got back to his cattle and began to lay plans, and from that day on it was a cold day when he did not bring in some of the colonel's stray stock.

It was a puzzle to the old gentleman why his cattle should wander six or seven miles after pasture when they had better at home, but it was no mystery to Miss Rose. Every time a bunch of the missing cattle came back Joe had to stop to explain and to call for a drink of water and to hang around for a good half hour and that girl, who didn't know what a flirtation meant, laughed to herself after he had departed.

Miss Taylor, the lone cowboy in the colonel's employ, was past forty. Had a wife somewhere in the east and was out of the running, but he was no wooden head. When those lost cattle were driven up he would go to the colonel and declare that somebody was driving them (at that he might have the privilege of driving them back again, and that if Miss Rose were his daughter he would put his foot down. Then the colonel would look up in an innocent way and exclaim:

"Lord love us, but you don't think Rosa drives our cattle and then drives them back again?"

"No, I don't, colonel, but don't it strike you that Joe Whitman is coming here mighty often?"

"Is he? Well, he has to bring back the strays, you know, and it is very kind of him indeed. I don't always see him, but I hope that Rosa returns my thanks in a proper way."

Joe was working the cattle business for all it was worth and calling at the Circle ranch between times with oranges and boxes of candy sent to him by Denver, when a rival suddenly moved the field.

Sergeant Smith, from the fort, came along one day with a squad of men and stopped at the house to make some inquiries. The sergeant was a good looking man. He had a taking way with him. A flirtation was started almost at once, and when he took up his line of march again he promised himself the pleasure of another call.

Three days later he rode out to the ranch and began to make love in earnest. He had served Uncle Sam for twelve years, saved up \$200 and was looking for a wife. While he continued to be a soldier he could have a place as one of the landladies in Company G.

Before the sergeant got away Joe Whitman came riding up. The two men instinctively recognized each other as rivals and glared and muttered, but there was no bloodshed.

When the son of Mars had gone, there was a quarrel between the two left. Joe's jealousy made it, although when asked what rights he had he could not define them. He hinted that he would bring back no more lost cattle and was told not to put himself out in future, and he called Miss Rose a heartless flirt and rode away with his broncho's heels in the air.

It is just as easy for a man to make a fool of himself on the plains of the west as at Newport or Saratoga. When Joe had cooled down he admitted that

he was in the wrong, but it required more moral courage than he possessed to ride over and make a confession. In this emergency he haunted the spring until he found out from Martha, the colored woman, that on a certain day and date Miss Rose and the sergeant were to take a two mile walk to a certain limestone cave on the banks of the river.

Every man has a friend somewhere if he will only hunt him up. After thinking things over Joe decided to go to old man Barnes, who kept a saloon, eating house and a sort of menagerie in town, and when his case had been stated the old man replied:

"Easiest thing in the world, my boy. You want to run that sergeant off the ranch and make a hero of yourself at the same time?"

"But he don't look like a feller who could be run," was protested.

"Make no mistake, my boy. You can run his coat tails out straight if only you go about it right."

"But how can I make a hero of myself?"

"That's a part of the game. Now listen to me."

Three days later the sergeant rode up to the ranch with his chest puffed out and a complacent look on his face. He felt that he was a winner. He was going to honor the ranchman's daughter by taking her into Uncle Sam's service.

His welcome wasn't quite as genial as it might have been, as Miss Rose was beginning to feel conscience-stricken about Joe Whitman. She had found on mature consideration that she liked Joe very much, and when a girl will admit that and be sorry that she did with another man at the same time she is very near the point of loving.

The horse was left at the stables, and the pair started for the cave on foot. On the way the sergeant got ready to propose, but a rattlesnake created a diversion. He made ready a second time, but a stray steer had to be clubbed away, and so the river was reached without a recruit being added to the army.

The cave contained three rooms and was accounted a wonder. A torch that had been prepared was lighted, and the couple entered the dark mouth, but had hardly reached the center of the first room when they were saluted by such a growling and clawing and roaring as held them spellbound for a moment. Then as a monster bear came rushing at them from one of the inner rooms the doughty sergeant broke for daylight and fled at his best pace. The calls of the girl were unheeded. He hadn't served twelve years in the army to become bear's meat. He wanted a wife, and Company G wanted a second lieutenant, but he would try to find the woman in town. He covered the mile to the house without a break and then mounted his gallant steed and set off for the fort. He even forgot to leave best wishes behind.

Meanwhile Miss Rose had stumbled and fallen and fainted away. It was as good a chance as a bear ever had, but this particular animal failed to take advantage of the occasion.

In the first place, he was muzzled, and, in the next, Joe Whitman was hanging on to the end of a long rope fastened to his collar. When he had fulfilled his mission he was tied up, and Joe went out and abandoned the still unconscious girl and had borne her nearly home when she revived.

As she opened her eyes and wondered how she had tasted to the bear Joe pointed out the sergeant riding away. He also displayed his bloody hunting knife.

"Oh, Joe, but the bear—the bear!" gasped the girl on his arm.

"I came along just in time to kill it. Thank heaven, you are not hurt. Here you are at home. I am glad I was of service to you, but I can't come in. After what was said the other day?"

"You will come in, of course. There may be another bear around."

There wasn't, but during the next hour Joe had a talk with the colonel and both of them shook hands at the end of it and said they were glad. That night when Joe led the bear back to the town and his cake the owner gruffly queried:

"Well, did it work?"

"Spectacularly."

"Then hand over the ten. When you want a second wife come to me and we will put up some other job to get her."

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